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Invoking Simplicity: 'Alternative' Food and the Reinvention of Distinction

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Abstract

Contributing to debates that question the prevalence of distinction surrounding contemporary food culture, this article considers the persistence of social differentiation within the context of 'alternative' food practice. Doing so is predicated upon the impasse between arguments that food offers a means of conferring status on the one hand, and a means for wide participation in cultural consumption on the other. Starting from this binary of 'omnivorousness' (Peterson and Kern) and 'distinction' (Bourdieu), this case-study explores a field of alternative food consumption including a farmers' market and community food co-operative. Here, despite wider claims that food ceases to provide means of social differentiation (Bennett *et al.*) we find that discourses of distinction resonate across this case-study, finding expression in participant accounts of food practice, and in discourse framing alternative food as a solution to public policy problems such as social exclusion, unsustainability and lack of integrity in contemporary food systems. Of some consequence to initiatives seeking to develop equitable and sustainable alternatives to conventional foodways, distinction, it is argued, is reinvented under the guise of rustic simplicity.

Introduction

As a response to the challenges posed by global environmental changes, we can see a plethora of initiatives emerging that seek to ameliorate a demoralised and unsustainable food system. Farmers' markets, community food co-operatives, organic produce delivery schemes, fair trade and green product ranges represent but a few examples. However, the extent to which our ethical or green purchasing habits have bearing on alleviating environmental harms and reducing resource depletion have been repeatedly questioned by virtue of its lack of inclusiveness to all (Guthman 2008; Slocum 2008; Zukin 2008). That is, we are reminded of the predominantly white and middle class composition of consumers occupying spaces of 'alternative' consumption, which is thought to consequently achieve the exclusion and displacement of working class and ethnic minority 'others'. Yet, it seems that farmers' markets receive considerable

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attention from the academy, policy and third sector organisations alike as an avenue towards the amelioration of conventional foodways considered lacking integrity and social responsibility. Crucially, they are presented as a means of appropriate access to alternative for all. While the rise of the flexible, neo-liberal consumer agent (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992) suggests that consumers be understood as less and less constrained by the boundaries of their class culture, the extent to which cultural differentiation can be observed along classed lines has continued to be interrogated. This is particularly pronounced in scholarly debates that question the salience of distinction in contemporary, conventional food consumption practice (Peterson and Kern 1996; Bennett *et al.* 2009) wherein tastes for particular goods over others are thought to express or betray one's social position (Bourdieu 1984). In this way, by considering the extent to which such distinction resonates across a field of alternative food practice, the article considers the extent to which alternative food is as widely available and culturally reasonable for all, a view commonly supported by alternative food advocates.

By means of a case study, this article explores the resonance of distinction across an alternative foodscape – a farmers' market and a community food co-operative located within the same neighbourhood. A survey establishes demographic classification of respondents, qualitative data is collected via participant observation, interviews as well as wider cultural and textual analysis of documents – from policy statements to celebrity chef cooking recipes. These serve to examine the cultural basis of social differentiation through distinction. Offering an interpretation of this data, it is argued that distinctions in food consumption cannot so readily be understood as a relic of a more elitist past. Rather, the data is suggestive of subtler means through which distinction plays out within the context of alternative food consumption, despite claims that such spaces offer a means for all to reconnect with food. Indeed, as such an alternative food initiative presumes democratic access, it is argued that there is thus little impetus to imagine and develop alternatives to the *status quo* that culturally, socially and economically reasonable access to all.

Food and social differentiation

While Veblen's 'The Theory of the Leisure Class' (Veblen 1899) marks one of the earliest examinations of the relationship between consumption and class, Bourdieu (1984) establishes the methodological tool-kit now widely utilised in examining class culture and taste (Lamont 1992; Southerton 2002; Bennett *et al.* 2009), where, through expressing taste for one thing over another our 'position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed' (Bourdieu 1984, p. 6). Although many aspects of Bourdieu's work have come under scrutiny and modification over recent decades (Lamont 1992; Southerton 2002; Silva and Warde 2010) its core premise continues to inform studies of social differentiation. Considering the contemporary applicability of 'distinction' in Britain, Bennett *et al.* (2009) find that contemporary cultural advantage is not so much pursued in order to advance in the social field through 'snobbishness', but is accrued via the competencies of the social actor to bridge and bond between expanding cultural worlds. However, patterns of cultural taste were found across and within fields, which, at times, find expression around class patterns. What remains to be understood is how food figures around such patterns. Considering Bennett *et al.*

(2009) find that the exercised and cultivated body is figured as an instrument of social classification – through sport, exercise, and diet management – it is perhaps surprising that the practice of eating, particularly within the home is not found to play a part in this. Indeed, surprisingly little evidence is found for differences in eating at home, other than to some extent in relation to social ritual and adequate nutrition (Bennett *et al.* 2009, p. 168). Meals eaten at home are described as ‘almost all of one course, plus a drink and perhaps yoghurt’ (Bennett *et al.* 2009, p. 167) while dominant discourses are concerned with time constraints, logistics and routines.

Despite Bennett *et al.* (2009) finding little evidence for differentiation in the food consumed across households high and low in cultural capital, they do not explore where these items are purchased, how these foods are prepared, talked about, presented, and assembled on the plate. In exploring the practical, social and biographical repertoire of dinner making in the home, Bugge and Almas (2006) find that different dinner preparation strategies are quite revealing of class identities. Urban middle class mothers tend not to cook the traditional dishes that are characteristically prepared by the working class mothers in their sample. Instead, middle class mothers prefer to add a ‘twist’ of something different, usually involving new and spicy ingredients. This is reminiscent of several studies wherein domestic practices are considered for their role in shaping one’s sense of location in the social world (Murcott 1983; Bell and Valentine 1997), where, for middle class families, food plays into framings of discipline and control (Wills *et al.* 2011) while for working class families, food plays a more functional role in daily life. Paying attention to classed means of styling meal, DeVault (1991) explores the significance of class relations for the conduct of ‘feeding work’ (p. 167) in the USA, where middle class cooking practices are considered central to producing family, in obscuring class differences, and in ‘recruiting women into the project of perpetuating them’ (p. 30). Working class women rarely report using recipes, and instead stick to traditions and routines learned from their mothers, while middle class women speak of styling a meal in order to provide a platform for sociability and entertainment. Corroborating this analysis, Blake *et al.* (2010) find that class (as well as race and gender) figures in different means of enacting and understanding what ‘local’ food is and how it is to be incorporated into daily food practice. Pertinently, Mellor *et al.* (2010) dinner party events as a ‘lifestyle showcase’ (Mellor *et al.* 2010, p. 123) where, if successful, maintain important social ties. Also revealing of the ‘dark side’ of middle class friendships, the anxiety felt by hosts about getting it ‘right’ illustrates the very competitive nature of this ‘feeding work’ (DeVault 1991).

Making a case of celebrity chef Nigel Slater, Ashley *et al.* (2004, p. 69) suggest that what and how we eat has a wider basis within class cultures and lifestyles, by arguing that distinctions are not only an inherent component of the material artefact of the foods themselves, but are activated through social action – the ways in which they are consumed and talked about. In advising readers on making a ‘frightfully common chip butty’, Nigel Slater (1993) is seen to revoke the style of foodie reinvention of working class food by celebrating the ‘plastic’ instead of ‘real baker’s bread’. He makes the point of reminding the reader to use ‘malt – yes I said malt – vinegar’ (Slater 1993, p. 176) while going on to suggest that this recipe ‘provides the perfect antidote to the char-grilled-with-balsamic-vinegar-and shaved-parmesan school of cookery’ (Slater 1993, p. 176). Ashley *et al.* (2004) consider this employment of the ‘frightfully common’ to

serve the purpose of informing and educating the new middle classes into the art of lifestyle through the performance of what Lupton (1996) terms 'reverse snobbery' – the art of inverting distinction in a way that disguises the limited accessibility to distinctive cultural goods as well as their associated advantages, or indeed, in the invocation of irony. This is similarly noted by Johnston and Baumann's (2007, 2010) study of gourmet food writing and interviews with self-professed 'foodies'. Here, Johnston and Baumann present a rebuttal of the 'omnivorousness thesis' (Peterson and Kern 1996) – the idea that a variety of cultural goods consumed across classes represents a shift away from class based distinctions in consumption. In line with Warde *et al.* (2007), they argue that the apparent democratisation of (food) culture through increased variety offers a means for variety itself to become recourse to distinction, for example, through the display of a more cosmopolitan self that is comfortable with a wide range of foods – from 'foie gras' to 'hamburgers'. For Johnston and Baumann (2010) subtler appeals to distinction are made through the frames of authenticity and exoticism, where it is the selectiveness of the ingredients listed rather than the explicit exclusion of the consumers on the grounds of price that constitutes the means of exclusion. Within the frame of authenticity, appeals are made to geographic specificity, simplicity, personal connection and historicism, achieved by reference to the origins of certain foodstuffs brandishing the most local of olive oil, while simultaneously, the simplicity of certain dishes are valorised by drawing on examples of small scale production of 'unschooled' cookery 'from mama's kitchen' (Johnston and Baumann 2007, p. 181). Doing so, they suggest, requires a considerable amount of cultural capital in the form of highly specialised gastronomic knowledge, alongside a clear conviction that 'authentic' foods embody far greater virtues than their industrially produced counterparts. Under the guise of a democratised food culture, 'foodies' embody what they argue is a distinctive form of 'omnivorous' good taste. To explore this dynamic – the resonance of distinction across a field of alternative food consumption – this case study concentrates on a farmer's market and community food co-operative.

Since their inception in 1997, farmers' markets in particular have received attention as a route through which to conceive of alternatives to conventional food systems. With out of town supermarkets relocating to the urban rim, they are thought to provide 'textured' (Ashley *et al.* 2004, p. 113) spaces of food consumption within the city. They form a representation of the 'old' though invocation of a sense of tradition, a 'glimmer of what used to be' (Giddens 1991, p. 147). Much like invoking a sense of the 'traditional', 'authentic' and 'pre-industrial' that has been central to the Slow Food and Fair Trade Movement, these concerns have formed what has been coined as 'alternative agro-food chains' (Arce and Marsden 1993; Ilbery and Kneafsey 1999; Sage 2003) or 'alternative' food relationships (Kneafsey *et al.* 2008). To speak of 'alternative' sites of food consumption is now common across scholarly literature, defined as 'new and rapidly mainstreaming spaces in the food economy defined by, among other things, the explosion of organic, Fair Trade and local, quality and premium speciality foods (Goodman and Goodman 2007, p. 2). While recent studies of farmers' markets in the UK, (La Trobe 2001; Carey *et al.* 2011; Dean 2011) have sought to profile consumers, more critical studies of consumer absence have emerged from the USA (Guthman 2008; Slocum 2008; Zukin 2008). For these authors, the alternative food movement is characterised by the limited politics of reproducing

white privilege. This article begins to carve a pathway for a more critical engagement with alternative food within a UK context.

A case-study research strategy

With an explosion of interest in 'alternative' food consumption from scholars, stakeholders and consumers alike, the field of study is extremely varied and difficult to define. Its geographical location, the apparent absence of less-affluent consumers and mostly, its professed ambitions – expressed by its managers and supporters – to reconnect the consumer with 'good' food inspire this choice of research setting. As located under the same managing association, this has led to the adoption of a causal rather than taxonomic case-study that considers the dynamic relationship between the two initiatives rather than multiple initiatives in different places.

Comprehending the resonance of distinction across this field of alternative food consumption demands a research strategy that enables the exploration of a wide range of moments in food consumption, from shopping to talk of its preparation, presentation, provision and consumption. Combining observation, note taking, casual conversations, surveys and several different forms of interviewing thus forms a case-study research strategy (Stoecker 1991). Indeed, when seeking to understand cultural practices as located within the complexity of the everyday, a mixed method case-study offers a robust means of exploration (Silva *et al.* 2009). While often attracting criticism as lacking the capability to elicit precise, objective and rigorous data (Yin 2003) these very weaknesses can even be considered strengths. Flyvbjerg (2006) finds it surprising that the 'force of example' is so underestimated in the social sciences. To argue that generalisability is an overvalued source of scientific development, it is considered instructive that the work of natural scientists is indeed guided by such 'exemplars' (Kuhn 1970). Here, the instruments of research capture something of the daily life conditions, practices, and cultural milieu of those studied, thus bolstering ecological validity.

Participant observation involves the researcher in participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994). This method has often been considered the most appropriate for understanding complex social interactions, for it is seen as the only method of data collection 'that gets close to people' (Gans 1999, p. 540) and allows for the observation of what people do, and not only what they say about what they do. As well as more structured and formally organised interviews, impromptu and unstructured ethnographic interviews were conducted at the research site. Although never recorded, *in situ* interviews contextualised the knowledge later gained through semi-structured interview. Each interview followed a similar structure, beginning with inviting the interviewee to speak a little of their food related routines and of the various practices surrounding its consumption. Crucially, not intended to produce a mirror reflection of the social world (Dawson and Prus 1995) these interviews sought to elicit narratives pertaining to food consumption practice. To understand the wider framing of alternative food as related to this case, the article examines relevant policy documents while also following references made by participants in interviews to popular cultural artefacts such as recipes from celebrity chef cookbooks. For Prior (2003) cultural and

consumer products provide a greater wealth of knowledge than simply 'content' for they are social products that are 'constructed in accordance with rules, they express a structure and they are nestled within a specific discourse' (Prior 2003, pp. 12–13). In this way, documents provide insight to the discursive frames of the social world in question, providing an essential element in contextualising the case within a wider social field.

Interviews and field notes were transcribed and coded in NVivo. Vignettes were then written as a means of moving from coding to an iterative process of analysis. Discourse analysis, through the study of talk and language provides insight into the cultures, social groups and institutions that shape social activities and identities (Gee 2005). As a form of discourse analysis (Foucault 1977) critical discourse analysis goes further in studying power relations as both expressed reproduced and resisted by interconnecting texts and indeed, talk (Van Dijk 2001). Here, language is seen to enact specific social activities, identities and 'ways of being' within a particular group. In this way, the article does not offer a definitive and authoritative account, but an interpretive analysis of the phenomena at hand (Wood and Kroger 2000).

Drawing on field observations gathered while volunteering at each setting, the next section introduces both research sites, followed by a discussion of the emerging policy context. The article then turns to discuss the resonance of distinction within this case, continuing through the lens of participant observation. This account is, in turn, layered with analysis of interview and documentary data. To finish, the article suggests that the ways in which distinction plays out within the context of this case-study has implications for those seeking to develop equitable alternatives to conventional foodways more generally.

A field of alternative food consumption

The farmers' market and community co-operative

Situated alongside the embankment of a river flowing through the city centre, the market usually comprises 25–30 stalls, staffed each week by the producers themselves. Green and white striped awnings and chequered table cloths cover many of the trestle tables. Salami and chorizo is displayed in wicker baskets, pots of home-made pesto and chutneys are tiered among wild flower arrangements. Large round blocks of artisanal cheese are laid out on wooden boards, with 'tasters' sometimes presented in a bowl or on a wooden cheeseboard. Chalk boards lean against the stalls, or are hung from the stall frame. These convey information regarding the produce – '100% prime organic beef burgers', 'Approved by the Soil Association' – and sometimes the price. The prices of items are not usually displayed upfront. The absence of forthright markers of price is considered by one producer to be central to the identity of a farmers' market. Fluorescent star shaped cards marking 'bargain prices' do not, for one producer, fit in with the ethos of a farmers' market. In describing the difference between a farmers' market and 'your average' market, a producer tells me of a stall that arrived some years ago that embodied such unwelcome characteristics. Identified as a characteristic that distinguish farmers' market from average markets, he goes on to differentiate between types of customer and producer to be found across these settings.

The vocal and loud market trader who bellows information regarding their special offers to customers is the antithesis of what he feels is the proper conduct of the farmers' market producer. At a farmers' market there is the sense that the customer is to approach them with questions about the produce, and not about price. As such, while observing interactions between producers and customers, it was rare to witness conversations about price. Instead, customers would ask if the pictures displayed on the awning of the stalls were of the farm, they would ask about the rate at which the produce might perish, as well as advice about how to best tackle de-skulling a pig's head. In this way, a farmers' market can be seen as a setting for consumers to reconnect with issues of food provenance, a trend that producers encourage through their willingness to offer advice. Often, this involves discussing segments of television programmes such as 'River Cottage', wherein customers ask for pig's trotters and heads, saying that they have been inspired by the self-proclaimed 'foodie' Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall. Features from such television programmes are often introduced by customers:

Field note 1

Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's recipe for pig trotters are brought into the conversation by a customer. She approaches the stall asking if the trotters on display were the only ones he had. He'd better bring more next week she says, as Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall is doing a feature on them in the next episode of the River Cottage programme, so there'll be a rush in demand, she predicts. The stall holder assures the customers that he will absolutely bring more next week if that is the case. Based on this exchange, the producer explains that people often ask for cuts of meat that have featured on such television programmes. Jamie Oliver's belly-pork recipe, he claims, marks a regular reference.

From this, we can see that market customers are seen to be figured in interactions that are different from those depicted as typical of an 'average' market. Customers make recommendations about what the producer should bring to market in future, they are seen by the producers to be more inquisitive about the produce they purchase, and they share information about what dishes they will prepare when they return home. They also talk to producers; they ask questions about the quality of the produce, they ask how much of a certain type of flour is used in the spelt bread, they make special requests for gluten-free products. From behind the stalls, the observer can witness conversations between housemates, spouses, parents and their children about what food they will prepare, when and how. We explore in greater detail such interactions in the later stages of the article.

At the community food co-op, customers have paid for their produce in advance, for upon picking up their bags, they place and pay for their next order. When doing this, volunteers and customers get to know one another by name. They often live in the same community, have the same neighbours and intimate knowledge of each other's lives. Around the corner from the site that hosts the market every Sunday, the co-op operates from a community centre with the help of volunteers who give up their time for four hours once a week. Throughout the two years of participant observation, volunteers have come and gone. Customers have even become volunteers. Among the volunteers are women and men ranging in age, ethnicity and nationality. Each week, the same routine of preparing fruit and vegetable bags for collection unfolds as two or three volunteers meet to greet the delivery van arriving from a local wholesaler.

Typically, there are five different items in every bag. For example, on one occasion, in a vegetable bag there was a coconut, four onions, two new potatoes, one jacket potato, four white potatoes, four carrots, one punnet of mushrooms, one broccoli and one cabbage. In a salad bag there was one bundle of spring onions, three tomatoes, seven new potatoes, one iceberg lettuce, one green pepper, one lime and one cucumber. In a fruit bag there were four bananas, three peaches, five nectarines, six apples and one melon. From the outset, the volunteers are unhappy with the quality and variety of produce delivered. As the grocer decides what to deliver for the price of £2 or later for £2.50 per bag, there was a narrow margin of profit to be made by the wholesaler. The volunteers face having to complain and switch suppliers regularly to avoid the continuous downgrading of quality:

Field Note 2

Today, the cabbages were of poor quality. They were very near their use by date, Gill – a volunteer – exclaimed ‘look at these manky leaves’. We stood pulling perished leaves away from the cabbages before sorting them into their piles. If they were not used at all, they suggest that customers might complain about the lack of substance to their bags. Customers, they say, have often complained about the poor quality of the produce they receive, such as brown skinned bananas lasting only a day of receiving them. This concerns the volunteer who is mostly in charge of its operation. She speaks of how she is concerned that the wholesalers see the co-op as a means of offloading produce near its sell by date, produce that the grocers whom this wholesaler supplies would not accept and would otherwise go to waste.

This concern materialises over and again. Boxes of wilting asparagus are sent back to the wholesaler. Potatoes, soft and sprouting would be thrown onto the flower beds outside the community centre. Having discussed this with customers, the volunteers eventually decide to change their wholesale supplier – who assures they will be given the best quality produce that they can for the price. The wholesaler lives up to this promise, delivering for example; broccoli, leeks, green beans, peppers and mange tout. Before a month is out, cabbages reappear. While at the market, the struggles and difficulties experienced by the stall holders in competing with each other – a picture that is a far cry from Sage’s (2003) ‘relation of regard’ – is kept somewhat out of the customer view. At the co-op, securing good quality produce is an ongoing struggle shared by the volunteers and customers themselves.

Before going on to explore the wider policy context that is implicated in this dynamic between the market and co-op, we ground a core assumption of the article; that there is a class differentiation between the co-op and the market. We do so by reference to survey data pertaining to the socio-demographic composition of consumers at each site. At the market $n = 294$, at the co-op $n = 24$. The stark variance in response reflects the difference in customer base, where the market typically attracts approximately 800 customers each week, while the co-op has approximately 30–40 customers enrolled at one time. Data pertains to variables such as income, occupation and educational qualifications and accords with measures aligned with the National Statistics Socio Economic Classification (NS-SEC) (2010; <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/classifications/current-standard-classifications/soc2010/soc2010-volume-3-ns-sec-rebased-on-soc2010--user-manual/index.html>).

Given that this is a case-study located in one particular neighbourhood, data regarding the area of residence of each respondent was gathered and corroborated with

data provided by the Welsh Government (WG) that scores each ward across Wales on an Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD 2009; <http://wales.gov.uk/statistics-and-research/welsh-index-multiple-deprivation/?lang=en>). The following data substantiates intuitive and common sense observations often made by the casual observer; that customers of the market were predominantly white and middle class. The WIMD scores neighbourhoods in relation to indicators such as income, housing, employment, access to services, education, health, community safety and physical environment (Welsh Assembly Government 2010). Based on customer postal codes as elicited by the survey, 12.8 per cent of market customers lived in a neighbourhood categorised as scoring 'high' on the index of deprivation. 41.7 per cent of the co-op customers also score 'high'. As well as living in areas of lesser deprivation, the survey suggests that market customers tend to occupy intermediate, professional and managerial positions in the labour market, whereas community food co-operative customers were more likely to be unemployed. In line with this, market customers earned a higher income, and had attained a greater number of higher educational qualifications in proportion to the community food co-operative customers. Similarly, 67.9 per cent of market customers' parents attained qualifications of an undergraduate degree and above, while 33.3 per cent of co-op customer's parents had attained an undergraduate degree. Notably, no postgraduate qualifications were held by co-op customers' parents whereas 16.9 per cent of market customer's parents had. Based on NS-SEC categories, 21.6 per cent of market customer's fathers held occupations of a routine or manual nature, while 41.7 per cent of co-op customer's fathers worked in such occupations. While comparisons cannot easily be made of these two sites – given the different sample sizes – it seems reasonable to at least suggest that there are clear differences in the socio-demographic profiles of customers at each site.

Widening out – the policy context

Since the WG pledged a commitment to sustainable development as its central organising principle, a number of strategies reflect the intention to develop sustainable modes of food production and consumption, as laid out in the One Wales, One Planet Scheme (Welsh Assembly Government 2009c). The 'Food and Drink for Wales' strategy as laid out by both the 'Local Sourcing Action Plan' (LSAP) and the 'Food Tourism Action Plan' (FTAP) each precede the 'Food for Wales, Food from Wales 2010/2020' strategy, declaring commitment to equity in meeting the needs of 'less well-off people' (Welsh Assembly Government 2009b, p. 5). Running alongside these declarations is the development of the True Taste brand, which, at its core is the strategy to 'improve perceptions of Wales as a destination where high quality and distinctive food is widely available' (Welsh Assembly Government 2009a, p. 24). This case-study problematises this claim to the promotion of wide availability of high quality foods, particularly for the 'less well-off' (Welsh Assembly Government 2009b, p. 5). Indeed, this strategy clearly promotes a two tiered system of quality – where distinctive foods become widely available for those who can both afford them and are comfortable with it as part of their cultural repertoire on the one hand, while on the other, data presented below is suggestive of a spiral of degrading quality in access to fresh produce for the co-op customers. In this case, we can see that the promotion of

distinctive Welsh food can come to odds with ambitions to make good food widely available for all. Exploring this in further detail, the next section suggests that the branding of True Taste, while promoting distinctive food through the creation of niche markets for value added products, simultaneously undercuts promises to promote social inclusion for the wellbeing of Wales.

True taste?

To further encourage consumer participation in activities surrounding 'good' food the 'True Taste' brand sets out to convey what WG suggest are the 'underlying messages' of 'purity, naturalness, authenticity, pleasure, integrity and quality representing good food, true taste and real pleasure' (Welsh Assembly Government 2009b, p. 7). Forming a large part of the FTAP, the 'True Taste' brand aims to 'improve perceptions of Wales as a destination where high quality and distinctive food is widely available' (Welsh Assembly Government 2009a, p. 9), while also providing 'an exceptional *food experience* to visitors based on locally sourced and *distinctive food*' (Welsh Assembly Government 2009b, p. 9). In haste, the WG set action points to address 'the needs of less well-off people' by supplying 'local and affordable fruit and vegetables through sustainable food distribution networks to disadvantaged communities' (Welsh Assembly Government 2009b, p. 6). This particular action point, they claim, is to be delivered by community food co-operatives of the kind studied here. On these grounds, we are invited to consider the extent to which such a strategy now undercuts the promotion of social inclusion through good food for the 'wellbeing' of Wales.

Interviews with the team responsible for the development of the True Taste brand, alongside observations made from attendance at meetings with marketing consultants and producers themselves, reinforce the analysis of True Taste not only as a distinctive brand, but one that fosters exclusion of less well-off consumers by virtue of this process. While it is in a way reasonable that branding strategies geared towards the promotion of economic growth, it is imperative to take account of the unintended consequences of such approaches within this particular context. Indeed, the True Taste brand seeks to generate economic growth around sustainable food by 'adding value'. Crucially, this value is added by virtue of creating a 'sense of place', accomplished by distinguishing the ingredients and constituents of a particular meal by means of inflated description. A meal of ham and eggs, for example, can be distinguished from the ordinary by noting provenance; 'prime local gammon from so and so farm with free range eggs from so and so place' (Interview: True Taste Brand). Through the careful deployment of language, a retailer is encouraged to charge a premium for food that is described differently, despite no change in the product itself. Furthermore, in developing a seasonal marketing campaign, the strapline 'Gwir Flas, am Gwir Bobl Go Iawn' was put to discussion. This translates as 'Good Food, for Good People' – a message that producers themselves did not welcome. Their preference was to market their produce as something that is more inclusive and ordinary. Specifically, they were not keen on their sausages being presented as 'posh', instead preferring their produce to be seen as of good quality at honest prices. Moreover, they were not comfortable increasing the price of their product, thus effectively changing their

customer base, shifting away from those who might be less able to forgive the shift towards a premium label or meet the accompanying price tag. Their resistance was dismissed on the grounds that the aim of this campaign was to promote a distinctive, and not an everyday, commonplace product.

Noting some disjuncture between the promotion of equal access for all to 'good' food, and the development of distinctive brands on the other, there is reason to argue that distinctive poses figure in discourses surrounding alternative food, albeit only within the boundary of this case. Indeed, these discourses are suggestive of the ways in which distinction can be subtly reinvented through the frame of simplicity. That is, if the food is simple – it is at its core a meal of 'ham and eggs' or 'lamb stew' – it can be argued that such foods are for everyone. However, through inflated descriptions and the associated hikes in price, the previously simple food has not only become more expensive, but seems then culturally inappropriate, as discussed below. Exploring further this suggestion that distinction could indeed be playing out across a field of alternative food practice, we now turn towards further examples from contemporary cultural artefacts consistently mobilised in talk. Here, it seems that the simple is not necessarily so 'widely available' (Welsh Assembly Government 2009b, p. 9).

Reinventing simplicity, reproducing distinction

A glimpse of public and private food practice

While farmers' market customers escape what they suggest is an alienating experience of supermarket shopping, the market offers a site for reconnection with food. Customers talk with producers about recipes followed to make 'pork belly with fennel and white wine'. They refer to the 'pigs' trotters' they will prepare according to recipes presented on the 'River Cottage' programme. Each week, regular customers return to purchase a little produce and to linger, chat, eat and drink what almost all of the producers have now made available. Crêpes, bean burgers, beef burgers, falafel, baklava, cupcakes, soup, curry, smoked salmon rolls, croissant and freshly ground coffee are but a few examples of what has been made available for immediate consumption on site as producers increasingly diversify their stock in this way. That there is a diversification towards ready-to-eat produce brought to market by producers suggests support for the theory that there might be greater evidence for distinction across practices of eating out than there are across eating in – as noted by Bennett *et al.* (2009), particularly given the trend towards more frequent performance of this practice (Warde and Martens 2000). However, given that the primary attraction aim of this site is to make available purchase produce and ingredients directly from farmers for later preparation and consumption in the home, this trend blurs boundaries between eating 'out' and 'in'. In this way, we are invited to the analysis that the market may then come to figure customers in entirely novel means of displaying status *vis-à-vis* their culinary repertoire through the combination of the performance of private consumption that is to later take place in the home alongside the simultaneous consumption of ready-to eat food in the public domain of the market.

This particular configuration thus allows for a glimpse into presentations made of both public and private food practice. Among the farmers' market customers is a clear sense that home cookery is to some extent steered by the guidance of contemporary 'foodies', while such references are absent from talk at the co-op. While there is little space here to explore in depth the accounts of interviewees from both the co-op and the market, it is instructive to briefly relate a theme that commonly arose. That is, co-op customers were very clearly committed to the practice of procuring and preparing what they considered proper meals, using fresh ingredients where possible, for themselves and their families. They also discuss matters surrounding local food issues and those related to the environment more broadly; questioning the necessity for GM crops, raising concern over the rise of large supermarkets and closure of local stores such as greengrocers and butchers. While these concerns are woven throughout narratives at both the co-op and market, the outcome of such concern results in differing accounts of practice. The farmers' market customers claim to turn to the market as a means of ameliorating their disenchantment with conventional food systems, whereas, crucially, the co-op customers who live in the same neighbourhood as this market do not attend. They have visited, initially drawn by the promise of this initiative, to find that it was not the kind of market they were expecting. Imagining that the market would act as a conduit for the simple exchange of produce from farmer to consumer, they were faced with something rather different. One customer felt uncomfortable; explaining that it represents what he now designates a middle class space. The classed nature of this space is recognised by audible cues such as accents, but also visually reinforced by clothing such as 'hippy scarves'. Indeed, he goes on to suggest that it is the other customers that foster this discomfort, for they all seem to know one another. He thus marks this space not 'for me'. Another co-op customer exclaims at the number of stalls selling food for on-site consumption, local handicrafts, home-cooked ready-made food, patisserie goods and even organic pet food. That is, among co-op participants there is a feeling expressed that it is not seen as a food market as such, but as a space for the consumption of novelty and expensive items. It is even suggested as a space in which people come to 'see and be seen', to meet up with friends and even rub shoulders with local celebrities, figureheads and politicians. While this atmosphere is perceived in such a way by co-op customers, it is considered by the more regular market customer a pleasant and convivial ambience that enhances their shopping experience. Indeed, the farmers' market provides the opportunity for a different way of connecting with food – whether it is consumed on site and enjoyed with a cup of coffee, or items taken away to be later prepared and consumed at home. To further explore the extent to which such a dynamic sheds any light as to the contemporary relevance of 'distinction' in the context of alternative food, we now turn to consider differences in ways that food is here talked about.

The recipes and programmes of Jamie Oliver and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall feature prominently in talk surrounding food practice as recipes for pork belly, pigs' trotters and hearty lamb shank stews are discussed at the stall face. Tracing these recipes, they are anything other than simple, non-distinctive and modest dishes. We might also note parallels with Hollows and Jones' (2010) analysis of *Jamie's Ministry of Food*. Drawing on imagery of the British government's war-time Ministry of Food, Jamie Oliver's private enterprise takes on the challenges of what is coined as the

national crisis of obesity. With the State considered ill-equipped to inspire meaningful social change in eating practice, Jamie Oliver's lifestyle campaign is extended from his own kitchen and from those of school canteens to the homes of working class people in the Northern English town of Rotherham. As he teaches local people how to cook from scratch, the constant reference to ingredients both expensive and difficult to source come to jar with an editorial failure to recognise the marginal and excluded position of some of these community members. With precise visual methods such as high-angle viewpoints of the town taken above from a helicopter, moving to shots of Jamie moving through side alleys and into the homes of Rotherham residents, who, incidentally, are presented as eating kebabs and ready-made meals, the viewer is positioned as a powerful voyeur and social explorer of working class life (Hollows and Jones 2010, p. 314). Described as a 'lifestyle expert-come moral entrepreneur' (Hollows and Jones 2010, p. 314), a label earned from his showcasing of ethical lifestyles through his various media campaigns, cooking programmes and cookery books, Jamie Oliver is scrutinised for his and his brand's role in reproducing class pathology. This is considered part of his moral project not least by enrolling the viewer in a form of voyeurism that reinforces class stereotypes, but in underlining notions that preparing food and caring for loved ones (DeVault 1991; Evans, 2011) is a practice destined for failure unless wrapped in Parma ham and served with shavings of parmesan. Not simply reproducing stereotypes, such representations push farther away more critical questions about inequalities as rooted in particular places and spaces that extend beyond neo-liberal narratives of individual responsibility. Indeed, Jamie Oliver's social entrepreneurship exemplifies how ethical dispositions are invested in ways that can be used to yield distinctive profits and advancement in the social, and in this case, culinary field (Hollows and Jones 2010, p. 319). If food is no longer considered a means of conferring status (Peterson and Kern 1996), how do we account for the distinctive poses evident here?

Accounting for difference

Drawing together excerpts of interviews conducted with 20 respective market and co-op customers with documentary analysis of the cultural texts raised by participants (Prior 2003) we now explore cultural preferences for foods that betray distinctions (Bourdieu 1984) and mark boundaries between what is for 'us' and for 'them' (Lamont 1992; Southerton 2002). While wider cultural and policy discourses speak to one aspect of this reproduction of distinction, we turn to the cultural repertoire of respondents' discussions of their culinary practice. Despite assumptions made by middle class farmers' market customers about working class disinterest in 'good' food (Paddock 2012) discussions frequently arise among co-op customers around strategies for obtaining the foods they value as part of their diet. At the co-op, customers often look through their bags, commenting on the quality of the produce. Importantly, they talk differently than market customers about the food they will make. At times, customers would exclaim 'oh good, we've got a good amount of potatoes this week' or 'oh, great, I can do cauliflower cheese now'. Such utterances were never, to my observation, followed by talk of recreating recipes recommended by celebrity chefs. Instead, there is a sense that cooking is routinised and rooted in tradition – 'there we

are Bill, there's your potatoes for your sausages and mash'. Going on, Victoria explains that she or her husband cooks sausages and mash every Wednesday. Either her brother joins them, or Victoria takes this to him the following day for him to heat up. There is no mention of recipes or of celebrity chefs when pointing out that they have the right sort of vegetables in their bag ready to prepare their 'full cooked dinner on Sunday'. Later, Victoria says she will make a macaroni cheese to use up the mushrooms in the stir fry bag. She recounts the how she makes it her 'mother's way' by beating egg yolks, milk, mixing with cheese and macaroni and 'sticking it in the oven' sometimes adding bacon and mushrooms.

Such utterances echo DeVault's (1991) seminal study of women's cooking practices. DeVault found that women who had experienced social mobility, mainly through marriage, would often reject their mother's recipes. They tweaked them, adding a 'twist' of exotic ingredients to show initiative when entertaining guests and husband's colleagues. Victoria represents more of what DeVault (1991) found among working class women, where they were content to stick with tradition and not to take nutritional health messages too seriously, content in knowing that 'vegetables are better than candy' (p. 218). Making vegetables and fruit available for her family is considered something that should be done, just as Blake *et al.* (2010) find in their study based in the north of England where working class respondents show some awareness of nutritional issues, there is little evidence of anxiety. Likewise, Laura, a co-op customer who was later interviewed, suggests that she did not worry so much about how many vegetables were being eaten, what type and how, but purchases a bag of fruit and veg each week, and that as long as the fruit mostly gets eaten throughout the week, that this is 'good enough for [her]'. Vegetable bags, on the other hand tend to be cooked all at once for a 'Sunday dinner'. This echoes Murcott's (1983) analysis of the 'cooked dinner' in South Wales, where she identifies the rules of this 'proper meal' – comprising meat from a warm blooded animal, potatoes, green vegetables, and non-green vegetables to which gravy is finally added. For Victoria, the 'full cooked dinner on Sunday' involves similar ingredients to those purchased by customers of the market; meat, potatoes, maybe with carrots and cabbage. However, there are differences in how these meals are prepared, how they are talked about and the variety in the types of produce that qualify as 'meat' or as 'cabbage'. While market customers speak of their 'pork belly roast' and of pig's trotters cooked in a particular 'River Cottage' style, the ingredients purchased are bunches of organic curly kale, fennel, purple sprouting broccoli, and butternut squash to name but a few examples, whereas the contents of a co-op vegetable bag contain more modest versions in the way of the more commonplace cabbage, carrots, and broccoli. In contention with the findings of Bennett *et al.* (2009), it does not appear to hold fast that distinctions cannot be found in home-cooked food, but differentiation in form. That is, while both working and middle class respondents each prepare 'cooked dinner', they are clearly achieved with the use of rather different ingredients.

Exploring further that distinction can be expressed through variation in form, we next turn to an analysis of supporting cultural texts. Here, allegedly 'simple' food often involves an added twist. Adding 'parmiggiano reggiano' to a shepherd's pie, cooking chips 'three ways', however, might fail to conjure the image of a simple meal. Having overheard conversations about Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's 'pigs' trotters' at the market as well as outright rejection of celebrity food culture from customers at the

co-op, there is some indication that a strong re-reading of Peterson and Kern's (1996) 'omnivorousness' thesis may prove instructive. That is, we might consider 'omnivorousness' as reinforcing distinction by appealing to variety itself as a means of conferring status (Bryson 1996). Being adventurous and willing to sample a wide range of cuisines may not so much provide evidence for a democratisation of food culture. Instead, it is this very enthusiasm for acquiring a cosmopolitan palate that can be interpreted as a form of distinction disguised as omnivorousness. At the market it seems that rusticity and simplicity provide a means of making such distinctions without drawing attention to the status giving properties of some foods and of some combinations of ingredients over others.

To recap, at each of the stalls food is presented in a 'rustic' style. Conforming to a popular imaginary of the 'local', cheeses are presented on wooden blocks, jam jars are covered in hessian cloth and vegetables displayed in sacks and in wicker baskets. The 'twists' that customers talk of adding to their meals speaks to the notion here that simple dishes are complicated and made distinctive through the addition of expensive and often difficult to source ingredients. Coupled with the insistence on behalf of those who develop alternative food strategies and initiative such as this one – that working class people are absent through choice – suggests that such processes of distinction feed into means of exclusion. That is, as the distinctiveness of the farmers' market generates in some cases the feeling of cultural discomfort – 'not for me' – (Paddock 2012) this is arguably reinforced by wider processes of associating what is good and sustainable with that which is distinctive and indeed financially and culturally inaccessible and unreasonable for 'less well-off people' (Welsh Assembly Government 2009b, p. 5).

Omnivorousness as democratisation of food culture?

In his book 'Cook with Jamie: My Guide to Making you a Better Cook' (2006), Jamie Oliver reinvents traditional dishes such as the meat pie, carrots, bread and butter pudding and macaroni cheese into rearticulated and refined versions of the same dish. Crucially, they are presented as recipes that he insists are 'simple' and 'rock solid' methods of recreating 'classic' meals. The meat pie, traditionally a means of serving stewed cheap cuts of meat and covering with pastry is re-invented by a recipe for a 'Lovely Lamb Shank Pie'. Requiring eighteen ingredients, including three quarters of a bottle of red wine, organic French trimmed lamb shanks and small bunches of fresh rosemary and thyme, this pie marks a shift from its traditional counterpart. A further recipe provided by this collection included 'Dinner-lady carrots' the recipe for which is precluded by a preamble, stating the following;

Last year I saw some dinner ladies cooking carrots like this. They were using one of those industrial slicing machines to knock out hundreds of finely sliced carrots and then throwing them in those classic dinner lady tins with metal lids. The tins were buttered and then they just kept layering the carrots with little bits of butter and some salt and pepper. I've tweaked the recipe by adding herbs and a tiny bit of wine, but essentially, these are 'dinner-lady carrots!' You'll be amazed at how quickly this dish cooks as the carrots are sliced so finely. Make a change by putting these in the middle of your table with a Sunday roast. Excerpt from 'Cook with Jamie' 2006, pp. 314–315.

This dish marks the reinvention of a traditionally cheap recipe by adding relatively expensive ingredients, such as wine and fresh herbs. Also, a traditional pudding recipe has been redefined in this book, with a 'good old bread and butter pudding with a marmalade glaze and cinnamon and orange butter'. Such inflammation of the titles of the food is reminiscent of the WG's 'True Taste' brand, where adding such 'twists' comprise either inflaming titles given to produce/the dish in question, or adding expensive ingredients such as locally brewed beers and speciality cheeses. 'Simple' foods, when combined in particular ways, undergo seamless transitions into the distinctive. While there may be wide cultural participation across social classes in eating a 'Sunday dinner', it seems that there are variations in the ingredients and their presentational form.

At the market, we find such foods branded in this way and have even won the 'True Taste' award. Branded as rustic, simple and straightforward, the 'good' food that apparently everyone can and should eat becomes simultaneously exclusive. Concomitant with Bourdieu's theory of struggle for the resources of the social field; the 'rules of the game' are misrecognised. If everyone is expected to engage in particular 'alternative' practices of food consumption regardless of social position, it might be recognised that only some have the cultural, social and economic capital to do so. Should this dynamic continue unchecked, we might imagine that future alternative food strategies could similarly fail to achieve the equitable foodways they aim to foster.

A future research direction

Through analysis of a case-study of alternative food practice, this article argues that while claims are made that food offers little means of conferring status (Bennett *et al.* 2009) that there are more subtle ways in which distinction is playing out within this field. At the crux of this dynamic is a reading of a farmers' market, wherein distinctive food is disguised as rustic and simple, and thus seemingly available to all. Crucially, omnivorousness – the perceived democratisation of food preference and access – can be understood to be the very means through which distinctive notions of self-expression play out, for it could be through variety itself that distinction plays out, as argued elsewhere by Bryson (1996), Warde *et al.* (2007) and Johnston and Baumann (2010). Earlier in this article, the contention that food and family dining in particular (Bennett *et al.* 2009) does not necessarily figure in displays of distinction is problematised with support from other studies concerning distinctions in family eating practice (Bugge and Almas 2006; Wills *et al.* 2011). Indeed, while the body provides a 'most indisputable materialization of class taste' (Bourdieu 1984, p. 190) a field of 'alternative' food consumption such as the farmers' market arguably represents a space that enables performances that uphold distinctions between cultural goods and practices. That such a combination of discursive forces culminates in creating spaces replete with distinction, is understood to present problems for those who see such spaces as the vehicle through which to generate spaces for all to engage in alternative and sustainable food consumption practices. It is a contention of this article that without working to understand what is valued and appropriate across class cultures, we are not equipped with a sufficiently nuanced understanding of what is possible in imagining broad cultural participation in alternative foodways that seek to

ameliorate a demoralised and unsustainable conventional food system. While we may hope that initiatives such as farmers' markets can deliver sustainable food for all, it is important to note firstly that, in this case, the form that a farmers market takes might play more comfortably into the cultural repertoire of a more privileged consumer. Not taking issue with farmers markets *per se*, what is argued here is that in insisting that such spaces are for all, we might well miss the opportunity for developing what DuPuis and Goodman (2005) term a more reflexive form of localism. Guthman (2008) reflects upon a similar dynamic when suggesting that such spaces limit the politics of the possible. By recognising the potential for such a distinctive dynamic to play out within fields of alternative food consumption, we might imagine less culturally uniform strategies for delivering good food from farm to fork in ways that enable access from a broad range of actors. To imagine a diverse response to the challenges posed by a demoralised, unsustainable food system widely considered to be lacking integrity, more research is needed to explore and better appreciate how alternative food systems unfold in practice. It would seem imperative, based on the interpretation offered in this article, that we look to explore the implications of contradictions in agendas that push for particular ways of 'doing' sustainable food. In pursuing one strategy, such as farmers' markets, who is included and who is marginalised? Understanding the dynamics of differentiation and their effects on broad participation would make a start in conceiving of nuanced ways of imagining, designing and implementing a variety of measures that contribute to a sustainable food future that has the potential to be more widely available and accessible to all.

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